

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

May 8, 2011

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

We have three themes this week: Mother's Day—and I know many of us have been thinking of our mothers and of the other women who loved and cared for us; secondly, the killing of Osama bin Laden which has called forth responses ranging from relief to glee to fury, and of course here at church at least we have the third theme: the Gospel in which the risen Christ joins two of his followers as a stranger in their walk toward the village of Emmaus.

Let's start with bin Laden. We've been inundated with news reports, editorials, and blogs about the raid in which he was killed. I don't know anyone in the West who is not glad bin Laden is dead. He claimed responsibility for horrible acts which we as Christian and simply as human beings can do nothing but deplore. He continued to incite others to violence and personally skewed world perceptions of Islam, planting seeds of hate and misunderstanding that will continue to spread. On the other hand, many writers have been concerned about the slice of American responses that seem gleeful or gloating. Bin Laden was, after all, a human being, and his death was a sign of the failure of the human community to find ways to reconciliation and peace. Perhaps most importantly, we cannot rejoice because his killing will be seen in many parts of the world as a reason for more violence. And a cycle of violence, hate, and revenge cannot lead this weary world to peace.

My own grandmother—whom I've been thinking about because of Mother's Day-- used to tell me stories her grandmother told her about war. Her grandmother remembered seeing strangers, soldiers, rushing onto their farm. She remembered seeing animals killed and a home burned to the ground. These stories and the feelings they elicited have survived into my generation. War may solve some issues, but it leaves scars. All we have to do is look in the newspaper at the editorials about "northerners" and "how we do it in the south" to see that bringing the civil war to resolution did not bring unity. We are reminded almost daily of how the sins of the parents are passed on to the children.

Julia Ward Howe, along with Anna Jarvis, is seen as the founder of the American Mother's Day. Howe—born in 1819--wanted a particular kind of

Mother's Day for our country. After watching the pain of women whose sons and husbands died during the Civil War, and after then trying to build and support organizations for widows and orphans, she decided women needed to organize in order to speak up for peace. Here is part of the proclamation she wrote in 1870:

Arise then...women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears! Say firmly:
" ...Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country, Will be too tender of those of another
country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."
From the bosom of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with Our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm!
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."
Blood does not wipe out dishonor, Nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil At the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home For a great and earnest day of counsel...

Of course, women do not have the answer to war any more than men have. Women have become increasingly involved in political leadership since Howe's day but sadly that has not brought peace to the world. As the human family we have a long way to go.

Well, let's move to our third theme. Let's look at what light the Easter experience sheds on all this. We might say that Jesus died specifically because he resisted the cycle of a violent response to violence. He taught: "Pray for your enemies." He rode into Jerusalem not on a warhorse, but on a young donkey. When his disciples began to resist his arrest he stopped them. When Pilate and Herod gave him a chance to argue or plead, he did not play their game. And from the cross itself he said, "Father, forgive them." Hatred and violence were hurled at him but they stopped with him, even at the cost of his life.

Martin Luther King taught about Jesus' radical approach to violence. King wrote: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

The two travelers on the road to Emmaus were reeling from an experience of great hate and violence. (And on this Mother's Day I should add that many scholars think that one of these travelers was a woman; they were probably a husband and wife.) A man they admired and depended on, perhaps even loved, had been brutally killed. Yet as they traveled they offered companionship and conversation to a stranger, and allowed him to offer the same to them. Their recent experience had left them carrying pain and loss, with no easy answers on the horizon, but they willingly reached out to a stranger and entered into a longer process, a journey to understanding and even healing. It is a long journey to wisdom and to peace. And at the end of that day they opened their home and table to a fellow traveler—and it was then that they knew him, in the breaking of the bread. It was then that they began to understand that resurrection came not because Jesus had done away with pain and death, but because he had faced it, had gone through it to the other side.

May God protect our bodies from the violence and evil that find root in this world, and may God guide our souls beyond the violence and evil that will try to take root in them, and may God lead us, following Jesus, into the long and patient journey that results in a life stronger than violence and death, a journey that will yield new life not only for us as individuals but for the whole world.