Remembrance Service

September 20, 2020

St. Dunstan's

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An Ocean of Grief

Two hundred thousand. Two hundred thousand people. Two hundred thousand deaths. Two. Hundred. Thousand.

That is the number of deaths from the coronavirus we reached in this country this weekend, or we should say that is the *official* death count. Public health experts say the reality is many more than that.

Two hundred thousand deaths. I've been trying to get my head around that number. It's as if the entire population of Augusta, or Montgomery, or Chattanooga were wiped out. Every inhabitant dead. Every life extinguished.

When I was a hospice chaplain we held a memorial service twice a year to read the names of our patients who had died. There were usually about 600 names. Reading them aloud took a long time.

So how long would it take to read aloud the name of every person who has died from the coronavirus in this country in the last six months?

Every year on September 11 the names of all who died in the terrorist attacks on that date are read aloud at the 9/11 Memorial in New York. It takes a little longer than three hours to read slightly fewer than 3,000 names.

So let's estimate an hour to read 1,000 names (although it probably takes longer).

That means 200 hours to say each name aloud. Or put another way, eight days and eight hours, nonstop, no breaks. That's 200,000 names.

Each of those names represents a life that is lost, a hole in the fabric of the lives of parents, grandparents, children, spouses, siblings, friends, communities.

Two hundred thousand deaths means an ocean of grief washing over our country.

And yet it is possible to go through our days without encountering that grief. That is in part because the pandemic has robbed us of our rituals of mourning. Responsible congregations are not holding in-person services, including funerals, or if they are the number attending is limited.

And those who have lost a family member or friend to this virus know it is no hoax, know that they must protect themselves and others from this horrific plague. So they all too often are grieving in isolation, cut off from others who might be with them through the pain.

In other tragedies we have had national days of mourning, and have looked to our leaders to speak the pain the nation feels, to help provide comfort and solace.

I think of Ronald Reagan speaking eloquently after the Challenger shuttle explosion, of Bill Clinton speaking after the Oklahoma City bombing, of George W. Bush trying to bring the nation together after the 9/11 attacks, of Barack Obama singing Amazing Grace at a service for those massacred in Charleston.

Those services did not erase the grief, but it helped to share it, to acknowledge that we are one people who feel each other's pain, who mourn for and with one another, even if we did not know the people who died.

"In every death we encounter something of us dies," theologian Paul Tillich wrote, "and in every disease something of us tends toward disintegration.

"There is an ultimate unity of all beings rooted in the divine life from which they emerge and to which they return," he says.

What happens to one affects us all.

Yet in this tragedy, with numbers climbing ever higher, there has been no day of mourning. There have been few, if any, words of solace or comfort or grief from our leaders.

"It is what it is," we are told.

In his book *Reality, Grief, Hope,* Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann looks at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the words of the prophets as they tried to make meaning of the disaster.

The leaders of Jerusalem, ensconced in a life of privilege and power, denied the reality of what was happening around them and of what the future held.

They, Brueggemann says, lived in a "constructed, contained view of reality that covers over the facts on the ground and offers us instead a preferred set of facts that reassures and confirms the way we thought and wished the world were."

Such ways of thinking "will not be interrupted by facts, for facts are characteristically 'inconvenient,'" he says. "As a consequence, the facts on the ground must be denied."

That is what the prophet Jeremiah is referring to when he says of the leaders of the nation, "They have healed my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace."

Jeremiah could be talking to us today.

We have been told the coronavirus is a hoax, that it is like the sniffles or a mild flu, that it will miraculously disappear, that numbers of deaths and cases are inflated, that children are almost immune to it, that masks are not necessary, that we've turned the corner, that a vaccine is imminent, that it is safe to resume our lives.

None of which is true. All deliberate lies.

Serious illnesses, loss of livelihoods, and tens of thousands of deaths have been virtually unacknowledged, while our leaders cry "Peace" when there is no peace.

Brueggemann says that the church has two principle tasks in times such as these.

The first is "to practice grief in the face of denial by truth telling."

"The prophetic task, amid a culture of denial, is to embrace, model, and practice grief, in order that the real losses in our lives be acknowledged," he says.

That means we tell the truth about what is happening. We acknowledge that thousands have likely died needlessly because of the negligence of our leaders. We hold them accountable and responsible for the care of the nation. We demand that the 200,000 lives that have been lost be remembered, grieved, and honored.

We also acknowledge as real and valid all the other griefs evoked by this pandemic -- the illnesses, the loss of livelihoods, the isolation, the loss of community, ritual, and routine. All of us have experienced loss in the last six months, loss that is deep and real.

Scripture speaks to such loss.

"My soul is bereft of peace;" we hear in the Book of Lamentations. "I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, 'Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.'"

Brueggemann notes that the church today, like the culture around us, tends to avoid laments and loss. The temptation to paper over it, to cry "Peace" when there is no peace, is real.

But we must do so if we are to move forward.

Which brings us to the church's second task in such times, which Brueggemann says is "to practice hope in the face of despair by promise-telling."

This is hope that is grounded in reality. Not wishful thinking that the virus will one day magically disappear, but hope that acknowledges the truth, the grief, the loss of our situations, and courageously says that this is not the final word.

This is hope that God is with us and that God will lead us into a future that we are called to imagine.

Brueggemann says the church's task now is to proclaim hope that is a "tenacious act of imagination, grounded in a dream, song, or narrative, rooted in the faithful authority of God."

The church should "dare to speak such a future that is there beyond all evidence."

Martin Luther King did exactly that in his "I Have a Dream" speech given in 1963 when segregation, Jim Crow, and restricted voting rights were still the law of the land. King did not deny that reality, but urged us to look beyond it to a new day when those realities would be defeated and we would all be closer to God's dream for humankind.

And then he called us to do the hard work it took to move forward, with the assurance that God is with us.

In the same way we acknowledge the reality of our situation today, the truths of inequity that have been uncovered by this virus, and dream of the better, more just world to which God is calling us.

But today we grieve.

We weep as Jesus wept at the death of a friend he loved.

We mourn what we have lost, what our nation has lost.

The last verse of our offertory music sums it up well:

*O God of love and mercy, we cry to you, 'How long?'*

*In troubled times remind us: Your love is ever strong.*

*Now as we grieve the suffering, Lord, show us how to be*

*a healing, loving presence in our community.*

Amen.