

Proper 11 Year B 2018

On Sunday, about half way through the Episcopal General Convention, Katharine and I attended a rally and worship service at the Hutto Detention Facility in Taylor Texas, about thirty minutes northeast of Austin. This particular facility housed women who had been arrested and detained for illegally crossing the United States border. There were some 900 to a thousand Episcopalians, Convention attendees, who showed up at the facility to protest this inhumane treatment of these women who had been separated from their families, their husbands; their children. Most if not all of these women came to the United States in desperation, fleeing violence and poverty... Most come seeking refuge from an unsustainable life in Mexico and Central America where their lives are in danger because of the violence arising from the rival gangs of the drug trade. Others come because they believe that the United States will be for them a chance, an escape from abject poverty. They are coming to this country because they want what we take for granted... and that is freedom, and safety, and dignity.

We were prevented by law enforcement from entering the premises, so we marched on the side of a roughly paved road running adjacent to the facility. We chanted... "We see you!" We held up our hands in prayerful solidarity... then we

gathered on a baseball field a few hundred yards away; and we prayed, and spoke of the Love of God; that in the kingdom of heaven there are no outcasts; that all are welcome at God's table... One of the passages from scripture was from Isaiah about proclaiming freedom to the captives; about the people of Israel returning home from their captivity in Babylon. On our way back to our car we walked past the front entrance. Beside the road was a sign with a sophisticated corporate logo.... Core Civic, it read. Katharine googled Core Civic and found out that it is a private for profit company which owns some ninety two similar detention facilities, all around the U.S. In the first quarter of this year their net profit totaled \$34 million dollars. Detention is big business.

Katharine and I wondered what if any difference we made by going... what difference would our so-called thoughts and prayers make? Later that day we found out that many in our group had seen white sheets of paper pressed against the glass of the slit-like windows of the facility by the women inside... they did this so we would know that they saw us. One of the guards inside told a member of a local advocacy organization that the women upon seeing our presence, felt that they were not alone. That perhaps they had reason to hope; that they had not been forgotten. They stayed keeping vigil at the windows until every car, every bus had left.

I am again reminded of Bryan Stevenson's coinage when speaking to the question of just what shall we do to challenge the injustices, the hurts, and the brokenness of our world... and make a difference. He says that we are to be "proximate." We are to go to the broken places and to the broken people. Great ideas and profound sympathy are all well and good, but it is our bodies and our blood that is required of us. There is no substitute for being proximate. It is more clear than ever to me that we must get out of our comfort zones and go... we must go to where the hurt is. Donating money is fine; impassioned conversation is fine; writing our congressman, or our senator is fine, but it is, alas, a waste of time these days. We are people who are made for Love, and Love requires our bodies and blood. Love must be proximate. And I believe that Love changes things. Love in proximity is the means of God being present in our world.

We have a brief, odd reading today from Mark. Our passage is actually two passages combined; two passages that are some eighteen verses apart. The eighteen verses in between is the story of the feeding of the five thousand, which occurs just after the execution of John the Baptist. Mark paints a picture here of desperation. Jesus and his disciples are being hounded by throngs of people on both sides of the Sea of Galilee. There is no time to rest. They are overworked and tired; business is booming. In our modern western culture I think we hear this

account as a testimony to Jesus' celebrity... but this is an account of desperation. The people have faith in Jesus because his compassion is proximate to them. This is not so much about Jesus' preaching and teaching and uncanny brilliance, as it is about the desperation and need of so many people. This is the world for Mark... A world that is burdened with the slings and arrows of injustice and disease and suffering and despair... and the healing that happens when that world is met by Love in the flesh. The feeding of the five thousand which the lectionary gurus chose to omit for today is testimony that a seemingly mundane act of Love in proximity ramifies beyond our imagining. Small acts of Love are exponential. Its effects are uncontrollable and powerful when set loose. It is as the Psalmist puts it, "marvelous in our eyes." It is the presence of Love in a world coming apart at the seams that enables God to call the whole of it good. This world Mark depicts in all of its brokenness is the very Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not some utopian paradise, but it is the world as it is, but it is a world in which Love can take root and flourish. A world ever ripe for redemption and restoration; our vocation is to make it so.

So our call as the baptized... after all that is what this gospel is about, the call of the baptized.... Our call is to meet the despair and desperation of our world with Love. And y'all that is hard. It is messy; it will be uncomfortable. It will take

courage, and discipline, and practice; and we have to do it in good company; we have to build alliances with other people of conscience and good will; they are out there; build alliances with unlikely people; people not like us... But the bottom line is that we must go. Mark's gospel compels us to proximity with the world's hurt. That I believe is the only way things will change. It is our compassionate presence, and vulnerability to the sufferings of the other that will change things. That is the meaning of the cross: Jesus in utter vulnerability and proximity to the world's injustice and brokenness.

I for one wish there were an easier, softer way. But Love requires our presence... Love requires our bodies and blood given for the world... and I believe Love is strong enough... strong enough to see us through, and strong enough to change things... strong enough to stand against the evils of our world... strong enough to bring dignity, and freedom, and safety, and well-being to those so wracked by the oppressive systems and structures that demean and abase.... Those so desperate... for just a good life.

I suppose I'm asking if we are up to it. And I suppose the answer might be: if not us then who? It is for us, the good people of faith, to say to the broken and

desperate of our world... "We see you"... and with vulnerable and open hearts
offer them our bodies and our blood.... Blessed, broken, and given.