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“God's People Got Salt”

Read Sherman

Trinity-Anjou Pastoral Charge

February 5, 2017

Scriptures: Matthew 5:13-16

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

Friends, what a week it has been. How I wish I could turn the clock back to the hours before the gunman walked into a mosque in Quebec City last Sunday evening and started shooting. Six men, dead, after such a brutal, cowardly, senseless act. Six men shot as they were doing something so ordinary, something we do ourselves here every Sunday, praying to their and our common God. Six men who happen to be Muslim, who are fathers, husbands, businessmen, a University professor, and IT workers. Six men who were generous in supporting their loved ones both here at home and their families back home in countries like Algeria and Guinea. How blessed to think of these men - and the others who were praying with them last Sunday - enjoying the anonymity and peace of worshipping God together with their neighbours and friends. How horrifying that in such a moment of beauty and peace, their world could suddenly come crashing down.

It's true that we don't know everything yet about what might have driven the killer to do what he is alleged to have done. But we do know what this killing has exposed - an underbelly in our society of fear of those perceived as foreign, as "other," as "alien." Too many of us don't know any Muslims personally. We see "them" on TV, or at the market, or on the Metro, and we question the way they dress and make assumptions about what they believe or how they live.

Until, that is, a tragedy strikes like this one, and we learn belatedly to say names like Azzeddine Soufiane, Khaled Belkacemi, Aboubakr Thabti, Abdelkrim Hassane, Mamadou Tanou Barry, and Ibrahima Barry. We meet their beautiful families on TV as we watch their funerals. We discover them to be, of all things, human beings, just like us. And then, like scales falling from our eyes, their tragedy becomes our tragedy. Indeed, it has been heartening this week to see Quebecers of all political, religious and social stripes come together in mutual horror for what took place. But will our solidarity hold? Will we change how we think about our Muslim neighbours, engage with them in respectful ways rather than avoid or shun them out of fear?

I have great hope that we as a society will rise to this occasion, to honour the memories of those who lost their lives, to lessen the chance something like this will ever happen again. I have hope too that we here in our

circles will find a way to make connections with our Muslim neighbours. Perhaps we know of a mosque nearby that we could call with a request to meet the Imam, or we could send a card of greeting, or suggest getting together for tea and sweets and conversation between our members. Let's put our heads and hearts together to do something like this soon, because as we have learned with our indigenous sisters and brothers, it will only be by creating a relationship over time that we'll truly come to know each other, and learn to care for one another.

And isn't that at rock bottom what following the core teachings of our faith would demand of us? What else could Jesus have meant by his teachings about salt and light? Matthew places these stories immediately upon the heels of the Sermon on the Mount. We barely get over stumbling through the words "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matt. 11a) when Matthew's Jesus talks about maintaining a zesty faith - a faith that is full of salt, power, action, sacrifice - lest your faith amount for nothing. Likewise the light - living as if God's kingdom is coming into being now is meant to live a life that shines with generosity and love for all to see. In a time not so distant from our own, Americans of African descent had to live through such persecution as they sought to claim their rightful place among whites as full citizens of their great land. Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus, as if a second class citizen, and lived her faith salty and light for all to see. Canadians of African origin lifted up women like Viola Desmond, a black Nova Scotian who challenged racial segregation in a movie theatre in 1946. She refused to move to the balcony after being informed the main floor was only for whites, and though she was convicted for her offence, her action emboldened others after her to agitate for racial justice.

These women lived to see the world begin to change around them and even, perhaps, because of them. Mightn't we, with actions that could be smaller than theirs, but still with power to transform, live to see the same? It is a privilege that will be denied, tragically, to the six men murdered a week ago by perhaps a sick or deranged individual. It is a privilege denied as well to the man Jesus who once had supper with his friends, teaching them about a new covenant between them and God, only to be tried and executed the next day on a Roman cross. But we, God forbid, need not die as they did to be builders of a new realm of understanding and peace. Each of us can become kingdom builders, people of salt and light, as we take stands aligned with the beatitudes, with the poor in spirit, the mourning ones, the merciful, the meek, the peacemakers, and yes, the persecuted. As we do so, may we as Gandhi once said, become the change we yearn to see. May our salt help season a more just society. May our light blend with those of other faiths, colours, customs and creeds until we become one with each other, one with our common God. For us, it is in the name of Christ that we hope, yearn, and act, this day and always. Amen.