

Yesterday, today, and forever

Hebrews 13:1-8

August 29, 2010

These are some of the news stories I have been following the last week or so ...

Thursday, the stock market closed below 10000, one more piece of discouraging news about our nation's economy. Earlier in the week, we heard that the level of sales of existing homes for the month of July was the lowest in fifteen years, and that the sale of new homes in the same month was at its lowest level since the government began keeping record in 1963. Economists debate whether or not we are headed for a "double dip" recession, but, in any case, the "recovery" is coming along a whole lot slower than any of us would wish. And continued high unemployment and tight credit are making life very hard for many of our neighbors.

Pakistan reports record flooding. One-fifth of the country is underwater and the health and well-being of millions of its citizens are in jeopardy. Commentators have questioned why it is that global aid for the victims of the Pakistani floods has been so meager and slow in coming, while the response to the Haitian earthquake was quick and substantial. I find that observation rather ironic, because, over the long run, the ongoing suffering of the people of Haiti, only a few hundred miles from our shores, has been largely ignored!

But it is hard for us, so far removed and so used to hearing about one disaster after another, to fathom the enormity of the tragedy in Pakistan and to muster up the will to help once more. We get disaster fatigue. We know we can't help everybody, but mostly, I think, when we hear about disasters like this, we are just glad it isn't us!

You probably saw or heard that Iowa made the national news this week, and I'm not talking about our eggs! An Iowa politician chimed in on the recent discussion about the religious preferences of our president to claim that she knows, for sure, that Mr. Obama is a Muslim. Never mind his baptism and his church membership and his decades-long religious practice. Never mind his own declaration of his Christian faith and his dedication to prayer. He must be Muslim, she said, because of the way he treats Muslims and because of the way he talks to them. (Wink, wink!)

Regardless of your own political persuasions, you do recognize, don't you, that this kind of public comment is no more than a thinly disguised exploitation of racial and religious prejudices? Indeed, to their credit, members of her own party did their best to distance themselves from her comment.

In New York City this week, a taxi driver was repeatedly stabbed by his passenger after answering "Yes" when asked if he was a Muslim. This driver immigrated to the United States twenty-five years ago from Bangladesh and has been driving taxis in the city for fifteen years. Acquaintances of the attacker were shocked and mystified as to the reasons for his outburst. Some folks have blamed public tension over the proposal to build an Islamic community center near the site where the World Trade Center once stood. In any case, we cannot deny a sharp divide in our nation between those ready to welcome the stranger and those determined to push him away.

The last news story I want to mention, you may not have heard. John Thomas, the immediate past president and general minister of the United Church of Christ informed church representatives this week that he is divorcing his wife to pursue a committed relationship with a woman with whom he worked at the national church office in Cleveland.

Oh, did that news make me sad! Sad for his wife and sad for him, but sad, too, for our church and for our witness as a church to a world that desperately needs models of faithfulness! I do understand human frailty -- my own frailty, the frailty of all of us -- and yet, that's why we have to work all the harder, especially as people called and claimed by God, minding ourselves and our own marriages, and encouraging and supporting each other, because the pressures against family, against faithfulness, are so strong. I know little detail about this story, but I do know the church will have to take some action. Otherwise, all the hard work done by the United Church of Christ over decades to prevent and respond to clergy misconduct will not seem to matter very much.

So, good news all around, huh?

But I chose to remind you this morning of these particular news stories for a reason. I want you to understand that Hebrews 13 is relevant! Listen!

(Read Hebrews 13:1-8.)

Hebrews 13 speaks to the way we relate to strangers and to the way we relate to those who are suffering.

Hebrews 13 addresses issues of faithfulness in marriage and economic uncertainty.

Hebrews 13 was written to people under tremendous pressure to leave their faith behind or at least to not take it very seriously, pressure to be like everybody else and act like everybody else, pressure to be driven by the same whims, the same desires, the same fears.

Because that's what it's about, isn't it? Fear.

Fear of those who are my enemies. Fear of those who might be enemies.

Fear of what is happening all around me. Fear of what might happen to me.

Fear of not fitting in. Fear of being different. Fear of those who are different. Fear of outsiders.

Fear of losing my livelihood. Fear of losing control. Fear of losing myself. Fear of losing my life.

I have been thinking a good deal about fear over the last year or so. Fear was the name of the rock I threw into the Atlantic from the beach at Columba Bay on the Isle of Iona. Fear was what I wanted to rid of. And fear seems to be at the root of much of what divides us against each other in this country, of what makes us suspicious of what we don't understand, of what leaves us anxious and unhappy and impatient and uncharitable.

Fear closes us in and shrinks us down. Fear hardens us and makes us defensive and less willing to take risks. Fear robs us of energy and joy and turns us against each other, making life that much more miserable, that much less rich and full, for ourselves and everybody around us.

This is not what God wants for us! And so I believe that one of the most important functions of Christian community is to combat fear, to confront a society too often ruled by fear and show it another way, and to create among ourselves a climate that is, as much as we can make it, free from fear.

You know, don't you, what is the antidote to fear? Love!

There is no fear in love ... perfect love drives out all fear.

Keep on loving one another as Christians. Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. Remember those who are suffering, as though you were suffering as they are.

We combat fear with love, with generosity, with empathy. We welcome strangers. We don't do our best to ignore them or avoid them or push them away. We remember those who are suffering. We don't do our best to ignore them or forget them. By our love, we create a safe space for our neighbors, a welcoming, accepting, nurturing space, a space where both the one loved and the one loving may be free from fear.

That's why faithful marriage is so important, because marriage is about creating safe space, a space free from fear. That's what I told the young man and young woman I married here in this sanctuary a week ago:

Your love for each other creates a space where you are each free from fear -- free to be yourself, free to take risks, free to say what you really think, free to ask for what you really want, free to listen and to learn from your partner without becoming anything less yourself, free to change, free to change your mind, free to grow, free to grow up, free to grow up into the beautiful child of God God made you and intends you to be ...

Faithful marriage serves God's purposes for the lives of the married couple themselves, as they change and adjust and make sacrifices for the sake of the union that is more than each of them alone.

But faithful marriage serves a wider purpose, too, because faithful marriage provides a model, an object lesson, a reflection, however dim it may be, of the faithfulness of God with us. When this human relationship works as it is meant to work, when it fosters a climate of patience and forgiveness and constancy and intimacy and persistent hopefulness, we may understand just a little better how it is God loves us. That's why it is so devastating when a marriage covenant is broken. All of us suffer -- all those who are immediately affected, but those too who look on and believe a little less in the real possibility of lasting and faithful love, ours or God's.

And the love of money -- the ever-unsatisfied desire for more money, to bring us what we want, but more than that to bring us a sense of security, however false that security may be -- the love of money is rooted too in fear. The antidote is love, finding security in God's love alone, knowing that God will never leave us or abandon us.

The Lord is my helper ... what can anyone do to me?

So how do you feel when you hear bad news?

When you hear the stock market went down, or get a report that your pension account has lost one-third of its value?

When you hear about floods in Pakistan or bombings in Iraq or systematic rape in the Sudan?

When you hear the accusations and counter-accusations over the proposed Islamic center in New York City or Glenn Beck's rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial?

When you hear about another marriage headed for divorce?

Do you feel like pulling in and pulling back, closing in and closing down?

Do you feel like caring a little less about everybody else and everything else, just making sure you have taken care of you?

Do you feel less inclined to take risks or to venture outside your comfort zone?

Do you feel less inclined to listen to people you disagree with, or to care about people you have little in common with?

Do you feel ready to leave your faith behind or, at least, to not make too big a deal of it?

Do you find yourself thinking: "Whatever happened to the good old days? Who knows what tomorrow will bring? The only person you can count on is yourself."

Or do you remember this?

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever ...

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever! Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever! What can anyone do to you? What do you have to fear about anything the future might bring to you?

So be done with fear! Be filled with love, Christ's love, Christ's love for you, and Christ's love for the world which is expressed through you.