

Fourth Sunday of Easter

These words from our second reading sound appropriate. “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress.”

I listen to public radio all day and in-between patients I can actually listen. One day two weeks ago, I heard George Limbach call in to “Radio Times.’ So, on Monday, I had the radio on and heard nothing untoward. I went home and Larry called to say that there had been an explosion at the Boston Marathon. I turned on the TV to complete horror.

There was a great multitude at the event; people from all over the world, all over the country, people enjoying themselves, smiling, eating, drinking, old people, young people, children. None of that mattered to those bent on creating a time of great distress for innocent people.

There are all sorts of explanations about why these things happen, most of which are unhelpful. It would be a terrible deity indeed who would wreak havoc on the divine’s own creation. I can’t imagine living in a world where I had to believe that God was more interested in punishing people rather than shepherding people, although some of us did inhabit that world for a time. Some still do. You can read about it on line.

Violence has, sadly, seems always to have been a part of the human condition. I think that is what the biblical writers were trying to communicate with the many distressful biblical stories. Cain is jealous of Abel and kills him. Joseph’s brothers were envious of him and intended to kill him. Instead, they sold him into slavery. Moses kills an Egyptian soldier in anger. David has Uriah, his latest squeeze’s husband, killed in battle. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter and Abraham attempts to sacrifice his son. We would regard both of the latter as mentally ill.

Scripture, in its culturally limited way tries to explain how these tragedies happen. And sort of gives the impression that this is the way of the world, since the beginning, so there’s not much to do about it. And when people get mad or jealous or stupid or overly religious, they commit murder. And we are told that this is God’s plan, so don’t bother trying to change it.

I think we tend to read these bible stories almost glibly, without appreciating the horror involved. Oh, there's that story coming up again in the lectionary about Joseph and his coat. Here we go. It's not too bad because the end of the story redeems all the bad behavior. But, can you imagine a young Joseph put into a pit by his own brothers- some of whom are adults- and wondering if his own flesh and blood are going to kill him? Do we accept the fact that anger and jealousy led to attempted fratricide. Who does stuff like that? Who kills one's sister or brother or parent or child?

Ascribing horror stories to God's plan sometimes leads to an uncritical acceptance of the stories. We were taught the horror, yes the horror, that Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Issac prefigured the sacrifice of Jesus. We've been taught that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sin.

All the while, God is, instead, telling us that the entire law consists in loving our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus paints a picture of himself as a good shepherd who will lead us to springs of life-giving water where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. In reality, the stories of murder and mayhem are less God's plan and God's intention and more a warning of what human beings are capable of doing to one another, even to the most vulnerable among us. When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," this is what we're asking for – a deliverance from committing violence that our human passions so often arouse.

We are not supposed to act like the characters in the bible stories because violence is a poor substitute for charity. But we know that violence is easy and for a time it feels good. Joseph's brothers were finally glad to get rid of him. Cain might have thought that without Abel, he could now be the apple of God's eye. Violence also makes people feel righteous and revenge is so sweet. But violence in any form is always a failure. One can never redeem oneself and one's own cause by engaging in violence against another human being. There is never redemption in shedding innocent blood.

In the end, we know that life brings no easy certainties. The world often does not look like a place embraced by God's enduring love. The Good Shepherd, to us, might seem to have forgotten us and left us

behind to weep and mourn in our personal valley of tears. We search for belonging in a world we sometimes don't recognize and may not want to live in under the conditions that seem to have been set down without our consent. We often wrestle daily with the problems that mark human life. But, for me, there always seems to be a ray of light. And it is in that ray, however faint, that I personally find God.

On that awful Monday, there was the man in the cowboy hat who pushed the desperately injured young man to a waiting ambulance holding a blood-stained tourniquet as tightly as he could, essentially saving the man's life. There was the young runner who fell and could not muster the energy to get up and run away. Another runner picked her up and threw her over his shoulder and carried her to safety. There were the restaurants that handed out food and tablecloths which served as blankets to keep the runners warm. There were all those many first responders who ran towards the bomb in order to help people, those who opened their homes to complete strangers. Such kindness never makes up for the loss of life, but it goes a long way to making up a loss of hope.

I don't want to sound trite, but I thought I'd use the Fred Rogers quote that is making the rounds on Facebook because that's where I go in times of trouble. "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." And it's true. The helpers are the angels of God, our guardians dear who protect us, sometimes risking their own lives in the process.

I had forgotten that the Boston Marathon was an all male affair until 1967. Katherine Switzer, the first woman to run the Boston Marathon with a number in 1967 said of it, "If you are losing faith in human values, go out and watch a marathon."

We've had terribly difficult times in the past. Life is so rarely easy and problem free. We'll never know why people do the things they do, why there are those who prefer horror to blessing. But as long as there are those who gravitate towards the light and continue to hold it regardless of the consequences, we'll have hope that things can be different. This, I personally believe.

I'll leave you with the image of a little boy whose picture on Facebook looks like his First Communion. He's holding his name, "Martin." Martin was one of Monday's victims. In another Facebook posting, young Martin wrote:

"No more hurting people. Peace." Amen.

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