

7th Pentecost – yr A 2020, proper 11
July 19, 2020

Genesis 28:10-19a; Canticle – A Song of God’s Strength and Mercy (Wisdom 12:13,16-19)
Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Grace, peace and blessings to you from God our father and our Lord Jesus Christ

“I guess we were in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Those were the words of a man named Lance Ventry, an African-American resident of Waupaca, as reported by the Waupaca County Post on July 8, 1999. Two weeks earlier on Friday, June 25, 1999, Ventry and his family were driving home through Waupaca when they were attacked in an ugly racial incident by some unknown, young, white men. According to the report in the paper, Ventry was driving home with his three sons when they came under attack by half full bottles of beer thrown at his car. Racial slurs were shouted at them. One of his sons was reported to have been hit.

I don’t know about anyone else but I remember being shocked reading about this incident. To me Waupaca was, and still is, that “lovely small town nestled amid the hills of east-central Wisconsin,” as we were described in a pictorial directory of that time. To me that implies a sense of safety, security and tranquility to go along with physical beauty. That incident turned out to be a reality check for all of the people of our area. It shook us out of our complacency about racial relations and made us aware that there was an undercurrent of hatred in the area based on race. As I said, I was shocked as were many others in our area. I expressed my thoughts in a letter to the editor of the County Post.

I remember feeling sad for the Ventry family because they could no longer have that sense of safety, security and tranquility which we all want and which all of us should expect. An expectation deriving directly from the ideals of our nation as expressed in the Declaration of Independence that all people are entitled to Life, liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. And that is derived directly from the Christian ethic that all human beings deserve, and should expect, to be treated with respect. That’s all people; not just those with white skin. All of us are made in the image of God. Each person has that mystical spark of the divine in us.

Besides that, Jesus said his followers were to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as our self. All the other commandments and expectations of Christians behavior follow directly from these two. We know who our neighbor is from the Parable of the Good Samaritan and we know what our basic expectation is from that famous passage in the Book of the prophet Micah who wrote, “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”

Perhaps one might say this incident involving the Ventry family was just random and abnormal. To my knowledge it had never happened before nor have I heard that it has it happened since so why should I make an issue out of it? Well, it’s because we would have to be living in a cave to not know that this type of problem is rampant in America. Maybe not so much in small towns like Waupaca but certainly in places where the African-American population is greater. And I hear that lately it also applies to Asian Americans.

A while back I happened to catch an interview on National Public Radio about hate groups. One thing that has stuck in my mind from that interview is that hate groups depend on the apathy of the public. What they hope will happen is that the public will remain disinterested and do nothing. What they fear most is the public will become aware of their evil intentions and demand

some action be taken against the warped way of thinking that they try to promote. It is incumbent on decent people everywhere to be willing to speak out against these criminals and what they do.

For Christians the expectation is even more clear. It's called by some, "righteous anger." That's the anger that results from an obvious, serious, blatant miscarriage of justice against someone else...anyone else. Our Bishop Matthew Gunter recently asked all the clergy to read two books relating to the current racial turmoil in our country. One is titled Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson. It's subtitled "a story of justice and redemption." It's focused on men on death row in Alabama who have been unjustly convicted of capital crimes. Their convictions are based on fabricated evidence, and even when the phony evidence is proven, it is ignored. It's a page turner and I urge everyone read it.

The other book is I'm Still Here by a woman named Austin Channing Brown and subtitled "Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness." It's a description of the everyday indignities that a black person, particularly a woman, has to tolerate. Some incidents are obviously humiliating, demeaning or otherwise hurtful, but there are others that are so subtle that we, as white people, never would think of as being in anyway unkind. Righteous anger has its roots in the morality and ethics of the Gospel. Jesus gave us an example of his own righteous anger when he chased the money changers and the other rip-off merchants out of the Temple in that scene called the Cleansing of the Temple.

The Gospels frequently hold a mirror up to the reader. Sometimes we don't like what we see in that mirror. For some people it is too hard to look in the mirror so they tend to avoid the church and any sort of Bible reading, even the most cursory type. For others the mirror in the Gospels is put to good use. We may not like what it shows or tells us but we have confidence in the mercy and grace of God to guide us gently where he wants us to go. We know, for instance, that we are not only forgiven when we repent of our shortcomings, but that God understands and is patient enough to wait for us to recognize what needs to change and then to apply those expectations he has of us.

We acknowledge that God knows the heart of each one of us. Think of the prayer that we said a few minutes ago at the beginning of the Eucharist called the Collect for Purity. We pray to God saying, "to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid." We all know the old saying that God loves us just as we are, warts and all, but God is not content to leave us there and will continue to challenge us to do better.

The Gospel for last week is called the Parable of the Sower. It symbolically holds up a mirror to show how different people respond to the Gospel. Some produce just a minimum at harvest time. But where the seed falls on good soils a wondrous yield is produced.

This week Jesus continues using agricultural imagery with the Parable of the Weeds in the Wheat. "Wheat and Tares together sown unto joy or sorrow grown" is how the old hymn says it. Tares are weeds called darnel. In the early stages of their growth it looks exactly like wheat. Wheat is the good stuff and represents those who respond to God by living lives that work toward God's expectations. The weeds – the darnel – represents those who, for one reason or another, choose not to embrace God's ways. By teaching this parable Jesus' wants us to realize that it is not our job to pass judgment on people who may be totally innocent. Though we may think we know who the weeds are in our communities, and in the world as a whole, as well as in the church, it's not up to us to uproot them. Only God really knows how to handle the problem. Uprooting is God's job.

It reminds me of a situation involving my good friend from childhood, a Jewish fellow named Dan Levine. He became a doctor and lived in the San Francisco area. About 12 years ago

he contracted an incurable form of cancer. I flew out to visit him shortly before he died. During the visit his wife asked me if I, as a Christian priest, thought that Jews were condemned to Hell. I had never really thought of it though I knew historically there was some effort to promote that kind of thinking. I certainly didn't expect that subject to come up on the visit. I think God's grace was with me when I answered that it is always my hope that everyone would be a Christian but to decide their eternal fate was not my job. My answer was to say I was in sales, not management.

As we watch the news and contemplate the conditions of the world, we may wonder why evil is so persistent in the world that we are taught is the Kingdom of God. Yes, the evil one, the one we call the devil or Satan, seems to run rampant through our world. And we shake our heads in disappointed wonderment at whatever that evil may be and why it cannot be eradicated. We like to say God is in control. Then we ask, if that's true, why doesn't God do anything about the problems of the world? And then we remember that God's love for his people requires that they be given the freedom of choice...To do as God calls us to do or to ignore God. To look in the mirror of the Gospel and see what God has designed us to do and be, or to reject God's ways.

And this brings us back to the issue of the racial incident in Waupaca. Unless the seeds of justice and decency are planted in each person, we are failing the test of the mirror. Our faith teaches us that God loves all people – black, white, brown, Jewish, Muslim, even unrepentant sinners and those who have never heard the Gospel. We are all loved by God.

I have a book titled God is an Amateur. God is an amateur because an amateur is one who does something simply, and only, because he or she loves to do it. God loves to love and expects us to follow suit. Part of loving is to deplore those instances when there is a distortion in the relationship between people particularly if that distortion is intentional. There was a distortion in the relationship between those white boys and the Ventry family so many years ago. It was just a microcosm of the distortion that is a continuing problem prevalent in our nation so many years later. The mirror in the Gospel challenges us to learn how to make the necessary corrections and thereby change the reflection. AMEN