

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 9, 6+7 July 2024
St. James', Clinton
Joanna Benskin, Rector

Ezekiel 2:1-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God whose grace is sufficient for us and whose power is made perfect in weakness. Amen.

Friends, it has been a lot lately. We are dealing with our own aches and sorrows, and we are dealing with violence and hatred on a large scale. God's beloved children are being killed in wars around the world. Antisemitism and islamophobia and racism and homophobia and transphobia and misogyny and all kinds of hate are very loud right now, both on the internet and face to face.

And last weekend, a 13-year-old refugee child named Nyah Mway was killed in Utica. There is a lot we don't yet know about the shooting. We do know that this child is irreplaceable, a beloved child of God and of his community, a light whom we could not afford to lose. And we know that our world is broken.

We know that this kind of violence happens so often that it's difficult to process. Maybe sometimes we are numb to it; maybe sometimes we cry and yell about it; maybe sometimes we are just trying to get through the day as best we can. But we know that we need a better way than this.

And so we carry the weights of world-brokenness heartbrokenness and need to our scriptures today. We carry our questions about why this world is so violent, why it's so hard for us to live in love together. We carry a fragile hope that by grace a better world is possible. Sometimes we don't think too much about these hard things, and sometimes we can think of nothing else. Sometimes these breakages and these questions and these hopes are an unexamined weight in the back of our minds, a dull heat at the back of our hearts.

And when I come to our scriptures today with these hurts and these hopes and these questions in mind, the first thing I notice is another very difficult thing. (We will get to some joy and comfort and hope in our scriptures soon, friends, but today I can't turn away from this.) The difficult thing here is that hatred and violence are not just out there in the world; they're in our own house.

We have a choice of readings today that plays into Christian antisemitism. Christians have done horrible things to our Jewish siblings and justified those things by telling a distorted story about Jewish people rejecting God's call. The church's choice of readings today plays into that distorted narrative by pairing a particularly grumpy passage from the prophet Ezekiel with a story of Jesus being rejected in his hometown.

The Ezekiel passage is about a prophet calling out his own community in love and grief. There is a hateful legacy of Christians taking material like this and using it from the outside to denounce our Jewish

siblings. Pairing this passage with the Nazareth story in today's Gospel plays into the lie that Jewish people are uniquely at fault for failing to hear God's message of love.

Christians have used that story to fuel violent antisemitism. As Christians, we need to repent of that lie wherever we see it and find better ways to tell our story. The church is in the process of repenting. A lot of important work on this came from the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Some more work was done at our own Episcopal Church General Convention just this summer. And maybe in the future, we'll make different choices in the lectionary, the readings we put together for worship.

But we can frame the story differently, even with the readings we have. The passage from Ezekiel and the story of Nazareth speak to how hard it is for all kinds of people to accept God's message—not just any one group. We happen to hear about our Jewish siblings' struggles more than others' because we use the scriptures they wrote about it so faithfully. But it is hard for all of us to accept God's call to love and integrity and peace.

If it were easy for all of us to love our neighbors and celebrate God's image in each other and tell the truth and share our stuff without fighting over it, we would live in a different world. In that world, our neighbor Nyah Mway would make it to 14. In that world, Matthew Shepherd would still be alive at 48 years old. Marsha P. Johnson might still be with us at 79. Emmett Till might be alive at 83. In that world, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. might even still be sharing his wisdom with us at 95. But to our great grief, we are not in that world. It is hard for us to love and celebrate each other and tell the truth and share our stuff without fighting over it.

It is hard for atheists and agnostics to do that. It is hard for Jews and Muslims to do that. It is hard for Christians. It is hard for people of all faiths and people of no faith. God keeps on sending prophets and wise people to try to tell us how to do better, and we keep identifying those prophets as the problem and turning our violence on them.

This is what happened to many of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. This is what happened to Jesus, and to Martin Luther King. It's still happening. And when we say that it is a problem with one particular group out there, but not us, we are only perpetuating the violence more.

Violence is not a Jewish problem or a Muslim problem any more than it's a Christian problem. Violence is not a Syracuse problem or a Utica problem that has nothing to do with us in Clinton or New Hartford. It's very hard for all of us to take care of each other so that everybody can be safe and have what they need. We are all part of a system and a cycle of violence.

Some of us have the privilege to ignore that violence more of the time than others, but by what we have done and left undone (as we say in the Confession), we are all part of it. It is difficult to untangle the ways that we are part of the violence, especially if we've learned to prioritize the concept of our own innocence above the ways we are all connected. Our own discomfort and guilt are the least of it, and so often, we stop when we get there. There's so much more to do to heal the world so that our neighbor kids can grow up in peace.

But the good news, friends, is that the better world for which we hope does not depend on our strength or our righteousness. The good news is that we follow Jesus who came to heal the sick and set the captives free, Jesus who is in the process of healing the world, Jesus who empowers the disciples and us to be part of the world's flourishing whether we're ready or not. And a bad time in Nazareth does not

stop Jesus' mission. In the next part of the story, Jesus sends his people out to preach repentance and to heal the sick.

And Jesus doesn't guarantee it will go smoothly for them. Sometimes folks will be ready to change their hearts and ways and move toward a better world, and sometimes they won't. And yet, healing will happen, even when not everyone understands. Nothing will be able to stop the love that is on the way. People will be freed from what binds them. Grace will happen on the journey.

And for this particular mission of grace, Jesus sends the disciples out unprepared. He tells them not to take extra supplies. The disciples have to trust that other people out there will share with them, that the Spirit will help them, apart from their own planning and resources. This is hard for me because I like to be prepared. I take a lot of thought for packing my pockets and bags with useful things so I can be ready for what might happen when I go out. And there is a similar sending story where Jesus tells the disciples to be good prepared Boy Scouts and take extra supplies. But this time, they have to trust to grace themselves before they proclaim grace to others.

There are times to be prepared, and times to simply meet the grace of the moment emptyhanded. When we move in hope, there are times to organize and build power and strategize and pack our bags with useful tools and sustenance. Those are good things to do, and we need them. Being prepared can be part of making a better world.

But there are also times to walk out unprepared in faith. Sometimes we need to accept that we do not know how to change the world and can only try to love the neighbors near us as best we can. Sometimes our strength is in weakness. Sometimes we are called to rely on the kindness of strangers and the grace of God.

Jesus sends the disciples out in weakness, but he does not send them out alone. They go in pairs. And the Holy Spirit goes ahead of them. Some of the strangers they meet will feed them and house them. We walk this walk in community. We move together. The Holy Spirit moves within us and among us and ahead of us. The Holy Spirit is already in whatever places we see as most hopeless, most dangerous, most fearful. Even in this hungry world, strangers are already feeding one another. Even in this violent world, wise and kind and fierce people are already moving for peace.

Even in this hateful world, justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Even in this broken world, God's grace is on the move.

In our Corinthians reading, the Lord says to St. Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Paul wants Jesus to take away something he calls a "thorn in the flesh." We're not exactly sure what that means, and there are a lot of theories. It could be a mental or physical illness; we don't know. But for now what matters is that it's something that makes Paul feel weak. And instead of taking that thing away and making Paul stronger, Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you." Jesus says, "Power is made complete in weakness." Like the disciples sent out unprepared, Paul has to go out as he is, relying on the kindness of strangers, weak and in need of grace.

Friends, we need that same grace. We are not strong enough or smart enough or good enough to fix what's wrong with us, let alone what's wrong with our world. We bring to God our heartbreak and our questions and our hope for a better way. When we're honest, we know that we are part of the violence

and the hate and the hardheartedness we lament. So we listen and we repent and we grieve and we learn and we pray, and we call on the mercy of God.

And God is always ready to meet us with grace. God is always ready to hear our laments for our own heartbreaks and for the brokenness of the world. God is always inviting us to be part of grace for ourselves and for our neighbors and for the renewal of all creation.

By God's grace we are learning to listen to the prophets, learning to listen to Jesus. By grace, we are learning to turn aside from our death-dealing ways and to move toward a world where all God's children are safe and surrounded with kindness. By grace, we are called to acts of love and integrity and peace, from the tiny ones to the earth-shaking ones.

By grace, we are learning to tell the truth about God's glory in each other, learning to share what we have, learning to build peace. By grace, we are called to become part of the world's healing; we are invited to take part in a countercurrent to the violence and hate that flow so fast.

And together we hope that as we have so often been part of one another's suffering, we might more and more become part of one another's flourishing. Together we hope that God will use even our weakness in service of a love that is stronger than the powers that crucify. Together we hope that grace is sufficient and more than sufficient, that grace overflows, that grace will lead us home, that we and our world will be saved by grace.

Amen.