

HANDPRINTS ON THE HEART

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on May 16, 2010
Crossroads United Church

Acts 16: 16-34

John 17:20-26

If there is a tangential link of commonality between the two scriptures read this morning it is the heartfelt beseeching of one on behalf of others. In the text from Acts, Paul and Silas have been thrown in jail for putting an end to the exploitation of a young girl. When she could no longer foretell the future and make money for her masters, she was of no use to them. An earthquake shakes the foundation of the prison and opens the locked and barred doors. The jailer fears that the criminals have escaped and is ready to commit suicide in advance of the punishment that he fears is in store for him, but Paul beseeches him to do no harm to himself for all are present and readily accounted for. His beseeching stays the man's hand. Not only does he refrain from taking his life, the story goes on to tell that the jailer becomes converted.

In the gospel lesson Jesus is taking leave of disciples and preparing for his reuniting with God. As much as he longs for that reunion, he is concerned for the lives and souls of those that he must leave behind. He has supped with them, and taught them, and loved them and influenced them, and opened their eyes to new truths and deeper understandings. He has strengthened them and challenged them and exhorted them to dare to carry on living the example that he has set. And now, at this juncture in his life and ministry before his arrest and death, he does one more thing for the edification of his disciples: he prays for them.

In earnest he prays, " While I was with them, I protected them in your name... I guarded them but now I am coming to you. They do not belong in the world as I do not belong in the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them. I ask this for the chosen ones, and for all who will come to believe through the efforts of the chosen ones so that all may be one." Having taught, molded, equipped and enabled, and as he prepares to take his leave, he prays in passion and conviction for the steadfastness of their faith, guardianship and protection for their bodies and

souls. He seeks blessing upon their lives and witness as well as on the lives and witnesses of those who will be enlightened through their example and teaching. His heartfelt beseeching is that the handprints of God will be upon their hearts in no less a way than the handprint of God was imprinted on the heart of Jesus.

It is a lovely image is it not? The spark of the divine that was invested by God in the only born son, and has been the signature upon the lives of hand chosen disciple, is the same fingerprint that has been etched into our hearts. He knows our desires and secrets before we disclose them. He knows what is in our best interests before we have made the connection. He walks beside us when we need a companion, and in front of us when we need guidance, and behind us when the slope is slippery. And he does for us as he has done for all of his disciples since he walked among them in the flesh. Though we sometimes lose sight of his nearness and allow the assurance of his voice to be drowned out by the din of demands and busy-ness, he walks with us in good times, and in challenging times in that same spirit of love and commitment.

I have had a challenging week. In the span of a little more than one week I have been asked to celebrate 5 lives- the fifth one this afternoon in Gananoque. There are some weeks like this in the life of the caring professional when the ebbs and flows of life and death scarce give us a moment to catch our breath. It was reminiscent of another time in my life when I was living and working in Whitehorse, in the Yukon Territory and had been asked to celebrate the life of an 11- month- old -First Nations baby who had lost his battle to liver disease. The cemetery in Whitehorse is on top of Grey Mountain- a place that was lovely to walk through- but on this occasion the gray of the skies and the depth of the grief being expressed was taking an incredible toll on everyone who had gathered together for the final act of committal.

It was a cold day in March and the grief of Mikhail's parents and extended family was palpable. The size of the funeral procession and the slow gait of some of the grievous footsteps through the snow meant that by the time that all had gathered around the tiny grave, some of us had been standing for some time. The damp chill of a

sad, gray March afternoon had permeated into the very core of my being. I, along with other mourners, could not stop my body from shivering even though I desperately wanted to convey warmth and healing to a devastated community. It ranks as among a handful of times that I have been so uncomfortably cold that I began to loathe where I was and what I was doing.

There was the time that I was observing Remembrance Day on Capital Hill, supervising a school cross country race on an unseasonably cold October Day in Parham, and whale watching in Tadousac, Quebec in the Atlantic Ocean. That day, on Gray Mountain, rivaled these days where I was uncomfortable and miserable. When I returned home following the service I got underneath the blankets of my bed and checked my email. My cold was further exasperated with the news that my husband's best friend had been killed in a freak accident while walking home from work in Mississauga. Numbed by penetrating cold and further numbed by shock and feeling so very far away from my family I wrote an email home.

A former student, now an ordained colleague and who was a candidate from Whitehorse United Church responded thusly:

Nadene

I know how hard it is to be so far away and helpless, and our thoughts and prayers are with you. I have to tell you though how amazed and glad I am that you are there. In all the years we lived in Whitehorse, and for all the work and the intimacy with the lives of First Nation's people that (we) experienced, none of us ever could have imagined a day when we would have been allowed into the deep grief of the community. Yet in the short time you have been there you have made connections more deeply into the grief and the life of that community than you know. I know that your deeply reflective empathy is what was needed there and cold though it was, the warmth of your words and your presence with the gathered family was comforting for them. I have no doubt that you will leave your footprints in the valley of the Yukon, as I know it is leaving its imprint on your heart.

I do not share this deeply personal and professionally affirming message with you for self-aggrandizement, but as an example of how it is that Jesus' prayer for all generations of believers for all time continues to be answered. Whether in a solidarity of grief, or joy, or collegiality, or loneliness or empathy, the prayer for unity continues to be answered, for not one of us has escaped the agony and the ecstasy of human experience. It is the unity of common experience that is the glue that binds us together as family.

It is because my heart has been broken that I can weep with you, and for you in your loss; and because I know the rejuvenating power of laughter that I can celebrate with you in joy. It is because I have been numbed by bitter cold that made each second interminable that I have such empathy for soldiers in fox holes and standing in rapt attention at cenotaphs. And because I have been shocked into silence by unanticipated circumstance that I can appreciate just how pregnant a moment can be. This is the kind of unity that Jesus is requesting of God.

Not a unity that is sameness, but a unity that embraces and celebrates diversity. Not a unity that is equated with common purpose or agenda or *raison d'être*, but a unity that is stronger even than death. A unity that will become the glue that binds us together down through the eons of our past, and on into the future of the faith. A unity that bridges together and binds the letting go of separation and the hanging on that is rooted in faith.

Jesus loved much, and so it was no small thing for him to take leave of his disciples and to entrust into their clumsy hands his teaching and vision. And yet, he also recognized that he had placed his handprints upon their hearts, and as such the words that they would speak would be his, and the difference that they would make, would be attributed to him, and the glory that was inspired and providential and rooted in God would rest upon their lives and witness. The legacy that he requested of God for his hand-picked disciples is the same legacy with which we have been endowed and empowered in our day and generation.

May we continue to live as those who have also been imprinted by the touch of Jesus. May his words of compassion issue forth from our lips. May his hands continue to reach out through ours to touch and bless. May his feet carry us into the dark places that require light and life. May the love of God that empowered Christ continue to reside in us, and may we be blessed with the eyes to recognize the signature of the divine that has been etched upon our hearts. And to God be the thanks and glory! Amen.