

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER
Psalm 1; John 17:6-19
May 24, 2009

The Clock Stopped

I congratulate all of you who have braved the confusing maps, the traffic, the blockades and the hordes of yelling families and friends cheering on the stampeding runners to come to church. Your reward will be great in heaven.

This week end is also an open invitation for us to spend our time and our money in malls and shopping plazas where sales are the bait. That new grill has your name on it. The summer clothing selection need replenishing and tomato plants are eager to be adopted. Memorial Day Week End is the door to summer being gleefully pushed open. We survived another winter. Let the sun shine and the grass grow. Just let someone else do the mowing.

There is another, almost forgotten part of Memorial Day Week End. In every community across this country, formal ceremonies honor all those who gave their lives in service to their nation. This week end is particularly poignant for Vermont families who have lost loved ones in Iraq or who wait for the next deployment that will place loved ones in harm's way yet again.

So, on this first weekend of Summer; this weekend dedicated to memory, to spending money, to Marathons and to sun worship, we come to church to celebrate the wonder that is all creation but particularly, the glory that is humanity. We come to celebrate the closeness we humans have to God; and we come to be comforted by the living words of Christ. And yet, on this weekend, I look at those sales and note the count of box office receipts. And I hear the

mournful sound of ‘taps coming to me on a breeze that blows from Gettysburg to Normandy to the Viet Nam Memorial to Burlington and I wonder who we really are.

The Bible is not only a presentation of thousands of years of Divine-human interaction, it is also a presentation of humanity - the image of God in conflict with the knowledge of evil obtained from the forbidden fruit. Between Genesis 1 and Revelation, there is a portrayal of human nature in constant tension, caught between peaks embracing the divine and depths encumbered with darkness and despair. Sometimes I think we need to stop for a moment and ask ourselves: who really are we? Who are we that when we hear a piece of music or hold a newborn child, our souls can be so moved that tears form? Who are we that we can summon from our spirits the greatness to give our lives in an effort to save others - as did Commander Charles Keith Springle, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who volunteered to serve in Iraq and work with personnel struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Commander Springle and 4 others died at the hands of an individual no longer capable of rational thought after three tours in Iraq. Who are we that we can search for and find the cure for diseases, give our own blood to preserve the lives of perfect strangers or choose to spend hours volunteering our time and our love with sick and dying people at the Respite House? Who are we that beyond any other consideration, we focus our lives on the care of our children, knowing that they are entrusted to us to ensure the precious and fragile future of our human community?

But yet again, who are we? Who are we that we can send those same children off to die in wars that never seem to end? Who are we that we can fly a planeload of people into a building and kill thousands? Who are we that even as we cure some diseases, we can pollute the air and ground and water, laying the burden for yet more disease on those who follow us? Who

are we that we keep our pets more well fed and cared for than the members of our human family? Who are we that we begrudge the schools the money needed to educate our children? Who are we who close our minds and our hearts to those who do not speak, act or live the way we live? Who are we for whom all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? Who are we?

In my grandparents' living room there was a lovely old Grandmother's Clock that had been hanging there since my great grandparents placed it on the wall. The story was told to me when I was young that my great Uncle Bill enlisted in the army and went off to World War I. The day he left, the clock stopped. It did not start again, no matter what they tried until Uncle Bill came safely home.

The words of the Genesis passage are about 2500 years old. They were written during a time of loss, pain and hopelessness. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. The people were in exile because they had abandoned their covenant with God. The affluent had enriched themselves on the backs of the poor. The leaders: the kings and priests and aristocrats had ignored the warnings of prophets and seeking power themselves, allied the nation with those they deemed powerful. In their arrogance, they forgot God and defied God's law. Consequently, their world fell apart in Babylonian exile, famine, bloodshed and destruction. But they did return and in coming to the homeland under Persia, they had to rebuild not only the city, but also their faith in themselves and in their God. It was a difficult and painfully slow process. This is the atmosphere around which the Priestly author wrote that first chapter of Genesis; and despite the struggle for life and hope in which he lived, this description of creation is filled with Divine optimism. “*..so God created humankind in God's image; in the image of*

God, God created them; male and female, God created them. God blessed them. ..God saw everything that had been made and, indeed, it was very good."

The author of Psalm 8 is also filled with that Divine optimism. The whole Psalm is imbued with celebration of the bond that exists between God and humanity. Nowhere is it more compelling than these words: *"Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger."* The psalmist implies that the power of innocence and goodness is greater than the destructive force of evil. The 'very goodness' of God that flows through humanity - most clearly defined in the beautiful souls of the young, is stronger and infinitely more powerful than the despairing darkness that preys within and without. Made in the image and likeness of God, humanity is slowly and painfully struggling to understand the knowledge of good and evil; struggling back to innocence and goodness, struggling to be worthy of the likeness.

And Matthew is optimistic as he writes the words of Jesus that the earliest Christian community held to as they would a lifeline in a raging sea: *"I will be with you until the end of the age."* These words could mean: As you struggle to define who you are - what you are, I will be with you. As you yearn to be good, to be innocent, to be faithful, I will be with you. When all seems hopeless and you are tempted to enfold yourself in the darkness of despair, I will be with you. When the appeal of evil dims the light of goodness, I will be with you, tending to the light. I will be with you to the end.

Melodramatic though it is, one of my favorite Musical productions is Les Miserables. My family hesitates to take long drives with me because I put the Les Miz tape in and hurt their ears with my singing the entire score. Our rule is the driver gets the choice of music. They

plead with me to let them drive. There is a method to my madness. I graciously let them drive. The story as you might remember from seeing the musical, watching the movie or reading the book, is the saga of Jean Valjean, a petty thief, whose life is transformed by the generosity of a simple country priest. On the run from literature's pre-eminent bureaucrat, Inspector Javert, he assumes a new identity and becomes a successful businessman and mayor of a town. His factory provides work for the townspeople. Javert trails him to the town but not recognizing the mayor, accuses an innocent man. Valjean must decide which is the better good - to sacrifice the innocent man to a gross injustice and to remain quiet so that the factory will continue to run; or to confess, be arrested and have the town lose its source of revenue. In a memorable duet, Javert swears to bring Valjean to justice and Valjean struggles to determine which would be the greater good. Finally, unable to allow an innocent man to be imprisoned, he proclaims: "Who am I? I am Jean Valjean."

Who am I? It takes integrity and courage to begin to answer that question. Throughout our life it is never fully answered. And yet, the answer is echoed in the words we say; it is apparent in our actions; it is accomplished in the legacy that we leave behind. The answer, as with Jean Valjean, affects not only ourselves but those around us within our families, in our communities and in our world. God knows, we want to live our inheritance. We want to be wonderfully, gloriously the image of God. We want to live in goodness and innocence. Try as we do, we cannot deny that we know evil. We see it on the news; we see it in our communities; some of us see it in our families; we all sometimes feel it there waiting to take hold in our souls. Like Valjean, we struggle - perhaps not in song - we fight to hold on to the wonder. Sometimes

we lose for we are human. In losing we find our greatest strength; the power to move on and to move up.

Who are we? The beautiful hymn, *'Here I Am, Lord'* is a suggested text for ordinations. As we each grow into the answer, we hear another question: "*Whom shall I send?*" Who is there to bring light and love into the dark and cold? Who is there to comfort and console those in pain? Who is there to ask all the 'whys' that need to be raised? Why is there hunger? Why is there injustice? Why is there prejudice and discrimination and hatred? Who is there ordained to be the image and likeness of God in a world that cries for God's healing presence? Who am I? I answer by saying, "*Here I am. It is I.*"

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school.

These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.
- And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation.

Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all - the whole world - had cookies and milk at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

"ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN" by Robert Fulghum