

Rev. Craig Jan-McMahon
First Congregational UCC
C Pentecost + 8; 7/10/2016
Amos 7:7-17; Ps 82;
Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Week of shooting of Alton Sterling Baton Rouge, Philando Castile in St. Paul,
and 5 Police Officers in Dallas: Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael
Smith, Lorne Ahrens

Amos: I am setting a plumb line...the high places..shall be made low..
Ps:How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?
Col: ...bear fruit in every good work ..as you grow in the knowledge of God
Luke: and when he saw him, he was moved with pity..

Marching

Vacations are a lot of work.

The week before you leave on vacation, you have to work double-hard to get everything ready to leave, and yet when you come back it often seems that your work has multiplied like rabbits while you were away. On a short week like this week, with the 4th of July holiday on Monday, it seems no matter what you do you are hopelessly behind and unable to catch up.

This has been one of those weeks for me only more so...by the time Friday rolled around, I had a list of things to do--laundry, grocery shopping, errands here and there and everywhere....

In all of this busyness, I did not miss the tragic news from Baton Rouge on Tuesday, but I purposely didn't watch the video of it. Neither did I miss the tragic news from St. Paul on Thursday, but again I avoided watching the chilling video. Then on Friday when I started the day and looked at the news and read of the tragedy in Dallas, I found myself looking at the video, heartbroken, and then I looked at the other videos I had been avoiding...

And then I made list of "things-to-do" for the day--sometimes small, everyday tasks are a balm for the soul, but there are times when our souls are troubled for good reason, when to avoid trouble is unfaithful.

I will confess to you that I was troubled about this moment we share today; what you all might be thinking and feeling today, what Good News I can share as a preacher and teacher of the gospel on this day after this tragic

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week? What would I be saying if I remained silent and did not speak of
Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and Dallas?

After I finished my grocery shopping, I saw I had a Facebook message from
one of my fellow UCC pastors in the Quad Cities. She told me that there
was to be a Black Lives Matters march from the Police Station in Rock
Island, across the Centennial Bridge, to the Police Station in Davenport.

I finished my errands, put in my laundry, started my cleaning, and began to
think...

Should I go on the Black Lives Matter march?

Should I use the church Facebook page to announce the march and invite
you all to join me? What are my responsibilities, as a pastoral leader, as a
father, as a Christian?

And if I didn't go, would I be like the priest and Levite to walk right past the
wounded and suffering soul on the road? Would I be one of those Amos'
plumb line would show to be out of true, my sense of righteousness
unaligned with my deliberate and active care for the poor and needy?

I suppose the matter would have been easier to decide if I were black, or if I
had black children or grandchildren, or if I had police officers in my family,
and yet there is that part of the Good Samaritan story that says that the
Samaritan was moved by pity--his passion moves him to act: isn't
pity--compassion--a form of spiritual imagination?

And doesn't the commandment to love our neighbors require us to extend
ourselves to meet our neighbors?

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Aren't we as Christians supposed to be people who are known for our commitment to imagine the pain and suffering and grief of others and who like the Good Samaritan don't simply pass by?

I have a confession to make: I wasn't feeling it. I was exhausted from my busy week and had lots of stuff to do, but then I finished my list of to-dos and had nothing planned for the evening--no excuse really.

An hour or so before the march, I talked about it with a neighbor.

The conversation we had was like conversations we all have, about whether marches are productive of anything, of whether to march is to say the police are the problem, about whether the problem is broader and deeper, whether it is about poverty and prisons and racism and politics, or about whether we as a society expect police to be social workers and therapists and call on them to intervene rather than building social systems to care for people in crisis: abstractions really, merely abstractions.

Our conversation was not animated by pity or compassion but we found ourselves rehearsing the same talking points we have heard all of our lives....until we started talking about how we were talking, until we realized how privileged we are to talk about these matters in the abstract, about all the choices we have that others do not have and how very easy it is for us to choose to do nothing at all.

When the time came, I decided to join the march.

The leaders of the march talked to us in Rock Island, spoke about the need for the march, the hope of bringing about change so that what happened in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and Dallas does not happen in the Quad Cities, and emphasizing that it was to be a peaceful march.

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After the talking was done but before the march began, a pastor invited us to pray. Hats came off, heads were bowed.

We said "Amen" and then set off together to cross the bridge.

At every turn, there were police officers protecting us. What were they thinking and feeling I wonder?

As marchers passed by them, they greeted the officers, "Thank you for your service; thank you sir; we are grateful for you." Many of the marchers reached out and shook police officers' hands as they passed by--I wonder who was the Samaritan in these exchanges, and who was the poor soul suffering in the ditch.

About half way across, Pr. Mason Parks, the pastor of New Journey AME church just down 7th Ave here in Moline, a neighbor church, came along beside me and said "hello."

I met Pr. Mason a year ago, after the Mother Emmanuel Massacre in South Carolina. I was glad to see him but felt embarrassed about having failed to maintain our relationship. I wondered if all of this sadness would be different if people like me took the time and saw the importance of maintaining relationships. It is pretty hard to love our neighbors if we don't take the time to get to know them.

On the march, leaders were leading chants, and people were following along: hands up! don't shoot! What do we want? Justice! When do we want it. Now! What do we want? Change! When do we want it, Now!

I did not raise my hands; I did not chant. I felt out of place and uncomfortable, and I found myself feeling it would be dishonest somehow, untrue if I did.

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In the crowd I saw two people marching side by side who were wearing shirts that say "Love thy Neighbor," Thy black neighbor, thy white neighbor, thy Muslim Neighbor, Thy Gay Neighbor, thy straight neighbor."

They were joining in the chants and hand raising with the leader; I didn't have a chance to talk with them, but I expect they would say that marching and chanting was honoring the commandment written on their shirts.

Love is not an abstraction; it is an action.

As we crossed the bridge, people driving in the other direction slowed down to look at us.

Many of them whipped out their cell phones to take pictures. Some of them honked and cheered us on. Most of them simply passed by.

One fellow on a Harley hollered at us, "All Lives Matter" and then revved his engine loudly to drown out our chants.

When we got into Davenport, a few young men were laughing and hooting at us: Kill the Police they said, and laughed.

A little later a father riding bikes with his daughter yelled, "you're wasting your time marching; why don't you do something about it?" His daughter, riding behind him, was laughing--what else could she do?

To end the march, we gathered in a parking lot in Davenport for speeches: I looked around and saw people of all kinds, rich and poor, black and white, young and old.

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I saw many black parents holding hands with their little children, and I wondered what those parents must be feeling; white parents brought their children, too, and I wondered if I would have done the same.

Police officers stood off at a distance watching over us.

The speakers encouraged us to stay involved, to pay attention, to vote and hold leaders accountable; they praised police officers who serve with honor and called for justice for those who violate their oath to protect and serve. Many people were crying. Some were holding up signs. Others were shouting amen.

The final speaker asked us to look around at our neighbors, to notice how different we were from one another, and to remember that we are in this together, that by working together as neighbors, we can bring about lasting and real change.

The event concluded with prayer; all of us joining hands together as one. As we prayed, police officers looked on.

I have been at pains to say often and repeatedly that God loves us not because of what we do but because of who we are. I have said often and repeatedly that God's grace is given to us as a gift which can neither be earned nor can it be lost. But as the prophet Amos reminds us, God's judgement is given to us as well. This judgement, says Amos, is a plumb line measuring whether our worship of God is in true with our care of the poor and needy, whether our actions are in true with our prayers.

And Jesus teaches that to love God means to be moved by pity and compassion to take action on behalf of those whose pain and suffering has been ignored and overlooked and distorted and silenced.

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As people of faith, as followers of Christ, as a congregation who listens to the words of prophets of old asking how we might square our prayers with our actions, we must look for hope not by accepting the abstractions and arguments that dismiss and excuse us from action, but we must exercise spiritual imagination. We must allow ourselves to be moved by pity and compassion, by the suffering of others. We must open ourselves to the judgment of God, which is now and will always be merciful and forgiving, but which now and always demands that we ask how we ourselves have been untrue so that we ourselves can choose how to love kindness, to do justice, and to walk humbly with our God.

May our every prayer be an action that brings healing, hope, and reconciliations to a broken and hurting world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.