

Sermon Preached on March 27, 2022 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

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St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Joshua 5:9-12

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

St Bart's Lent IV

Oh God, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother, for blessed art Thou unto ages of ages.

I talked in a sermon a while ago about volunteering at the Telling Room, a non-profit that works with kids and writing. Last semester I was with a high school class of very new Mainers. This semester I'm in the physical Telling Room space with a half dozen eighth grade boys. And boys they surely are.

Last week we were working on sensory detail and we were all supposed to choose one of our senses as a superpower and tell how we would use it. I chose touch, and wrote that I would use touch to turn people in the right direction and nudge them toward right action. And I would use touch to heal. I thought of Jesus and his healing touch. But my thoughts went downhill after that and I said that I would push Vladimir Putin into a hole so deep he could never get out, and then I began to add certain choice members of the Senate. (And this was before the Ketanji Brown hearings!)

I know you like my sermons to be brief and funny. I suspect that's as funny as I will be this morning, because I'm not feeling much fun these days. I feel compelled to talk about Ukraine, but what is there to say? I have various questions and suggestions but I'm not sure they will form a coherent whole. Because the world seems so fragmented and fragile right now, and I believe that many of us are feeling the same way: fragile and fragmented. And helpless. Oh, so helpless.

So, what can we do? I read a small piece the other day about compassion and empathy. Do we feel for the Afghans or the Syrians as we do for the Ukrainians? If not, why not? The piece suggested it's because the Ukrainians look like us. And I think that's right. And I think that's implicit bias. And I know it's implicit bias that leads to stereotyping and racism.

I doubt we can free ourselves of implicit bias, implicit empathy and compassion that favors those who look familiar to us. But we can *check it* in ourselves. We can acknowledge whom we favor with our empathy and compassion, we can confess it, and repent, and try to widen and deepen our reserves of love for the Other.

I find myself thinking about evil. The theodicy problem. How can a loving God coexist with a world of evil? Free will is the brief answer. Evil finds its roots in disobedience, whether deliberate or accidental, premeditated or unpremeditated, religious or ethical, to the revealed will of God, we can, and we do, choose to sin, to be disobedient. For most of us, we choose to sin minorly, but there are those who can and do, choose majorly, choose evil.

I find myself thinking of Shakespeare's evil characters. Shakespeare, because he does evil better than anyone. In most of the tragedies, it seems to me, evil is a family or domestic affair. Hamlet, Lear, Othello. Revenge, resentment, jealousy abound. But MacBeth, Macbeth seems to me the most purely

evil character. Certainly his wife eggs him on, but he is beset by an ambition that knows no bounds and takes no prisoners. Ambition is his tragic flaw.

Remind you of anyone? It's easy to project onto the evil emperor of Russia, but what of our own ambitions? When do they lead us away from the path of righteousness? We can use this season of repentance to ponder these questions.

What *else* can we do? There are the practical things; send money to relief organizations, and choose carefully. Jennifer Willard is collecting medical supplies for Partners for World Health. Give as generously as you can.

And we can pray. Pray harder, pray faster, pray more. Prayer is the Church's Business, our business. I confess to uncertainty about what the power of prayer means, or is. But I am certain that at the very least, prayer puts us in mind of what or whom we are praying for. And that, as Christians, prayer leads us into action, action for justice, for peace, for compassion and mercy.

I'd like to read a poem by Yehudi Amichai, a brilliant Israeli poet who died in the year 2000. He was a true everyman of poetry, the most translated Hebrew poet since King David.

The Diameter of The Bomb

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,
with four dead and eleven wounded.

And around these, in a larger circle
of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered
and one graveyard. But the young woman
who was buried in the city she came from,
at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,
enlarges the circle considerably,
and the solitary man mourning her death
at the distant shores of a country far across the sea
includes the entire world in the circle.

And I won't even mention the crying of orphans
that reaches up to the throne of God and
beyond, making a circle with no end and no God.

Many of Amichai's poems are arguments with and about God. I don't believe he thought there was no God. Why argue with someone you don't believe in? For Amichai, I would say, his God is a God who's always weeping.

Let us give thanks for those holy tears, the holy tears of God.
Amen.