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October 3, 2010 - World Communion Sunday
1:1-4 & 2:1-4

Habakkuk

Thank God for the Little Things

Last week an 18 year old Rutgers University freshman, Tyler Clementi, jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge. It wasn't because he had terminal cancer or had done something horrible and couldn't see how to repair it. It wasn't because he was clinically depressed or because he succumbed to the pressures of the freshman year. It was because he was gay, he was ambushed by some fellow students on social media - they setup a webcam in his room and broadcast his private life for everyone to see. Being caught in a place that so many young people find themselves in - gay in a culture that is at least intolerant if not openly hostile, he saw no other way to contend with his sexuality.

And lest you think this is a singular tragic story, Tyler makes the 5th gay youth in 3 weeks to take his own life...and these are just the ones that we are hearing about. We know that this is underreported. One student is awful...5 is a crisis and one that must signify to us a dramatic problem. We have allowed a culture of bullying to not only continue but to flourish by our tacit acceptance of some ways of talking about other people, especially people you don't agree with. The glib and supposedly "harmless" words that allow for a characterization of an entire group to exist...words that dehumanize people...referring to the LGBT community as "them", calling a person running for office, a person who happens to be transgendered, an "it", making it somehow OK to project your own religious or culturally driven discomfort on whatever target you see fit, with no nod whatsoever to anything approaching civility...the roots of these deaths can be placed directly at the rhetorical feet of Sally Kern and

Bishop Eddie Long. How long, O God, shall we cry for help and you will not listen?

And the statistics are out – one in seven lives in poverty in the richest country in the world. And that’s with a poor measuring stick...it’s probably more like 1 in abject poverty and 2 on the edge, which makes for 3 out of 7 living life with a millstone tied around their necks. Hunger is a huge problem, especially among children who have no control over their fate. The gap between rich and poor has grown and continues to grow. The data shows that the top-earning 20 percent of Americans – those making more than \$100,000 each year – received 49.4 percent of all income. The bottom 20 percent took in just 3.4 percent of income. Most people consider themselves in the middle class even though that term is as endangered as the Siberian Tiger. Meanwhile people lose jobs, the economy sputters and we get little more than political arguments from DC. One party says let’s do the same things that got us into this place and the other party says...well, no one really knows what they say, they hardly ever say it. People walk away from their mortgages, something that many of us cannot imagine doing and something that we might think the previous generation would never have done. Yet, the previous generation wasn’t sold the idea that they could have more house than they could ever afford with no money down and then surprised 10 years later by the deception of predatory lending. So more and more slip into foreclosure, into bankruptcy, into despair and even poverty...meanwhile Wall Street has its best month since 1939 and banks enjoy record profits. How long, O God, shall we cry “injustice” and you will not save?

And lest we forget, there are other crises...an environment undergoing profound changes...the increase of extreme weather, hotter summers, colder winters, droughts, floods, more and bigger storms, wildfires, even earthquakes. The earth is shifting. And despite the heavily watered down and unbelievably divisive passage of the Health Care legislation in this country, hundreds of thousands of people continue to lose everything because they get sick or get irreparably sick because they cannot afford to see a doctor and wait until much too late to get much help. And we haven’t even mentioned the lack of justice in regards to people of different religious backgrounds, people who speak different languages or people who we tacitly invite here to do the work that no one else will do and then blatantly ask to leave when they’re done. Our lack of empathy, our lost imagination to see anything beyond how it impacts us as an individual...our gluttony for an atmosphere of winners and losers...all of these things hang on our necks like a millstone. How long, O Lord, will we cry “help, fire, police” and you will not respond?

At times it seems like the darkness will swallow us up. I take to not watching the news, in fact NOT watching the news or reading the paper or even getting on certain websites becomes a Sabbath for me...a retreat from the awareness that I know will haunt me and weigh down on me like that millstone. And then I usually think about mid-way into that vacation that even not knowing about it doesn't change it for the people living it, nor is my intellectual or spiritual angst even comparable to their actual suffering. And all that does is make the darkness descend even more fully.

Even as a minister – maybe especially as a minister – I can identify with Habakkuk's feeling of being abandoned by God. I want the action of God to be as apparent as a sunrise, as brilliant as a double rainbow after the big storm...dramatic like a spring lightning storm or that blast of heat when you step outside in the fullness of summer. I want to have no doubt that God is doing things.

I believe Lord, the disciple in Mark's gospel tells Jesus, help my unbelief.

Today we are recognizing World Communion Sunday...which means that millions of Christians around the world are practicing communion intentionally together. Now I don't know about you but it is pretty hard for me to see the church as together on much of anything. So holding forth communion in solidarity seems to me like one of those family gatherings where the conversation is forced and the smiles saccharin sweet. Even within our own denomination – Robin and I just got back from Wichita, from the annual meeting of the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference of the UCC, a body which has known a great deal of pain and darkness over the past couple of years and with few exceptions seems to be shrinking by the minute. Although there is healing and a new sense of belonging, the wounds are still deep and there is a hesitation...an unwillingness to get too close to our neighbors. It's a hard weekend in part because there's a lot to be done, but it is also hard because we are constantly asking ourselves "why" questions without good answers and trying to navigate with uncertain oars.

But I think that what we're discovering is that maybe it's OK to ask "why" questions – of ourselves, of one another, even of God. Habakkuk follows a long line of prophets who do the same. In fact, asking questions and debating is one of the central features of our foundation in Judaism that we need to recover. It is OK to doubt...in fact it is faithful to doubt.

Of course, having said that, I'll also say that I don't think, in the end, that "why" questions really matter that much. What ends up being more useful to me are the "what" questions...what happened? What do we do now? What does it all mean? I'm not sure that the "why" questions ever get answered in any satisfying way for me, but with time and patience, the "what" questions do get answered...sometimes in ways that are as bold as an electronic billboard, as audacious as a fireworks display. But that kind of vision chooses its own time to come. So when the prophets tell us to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God, or Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, these are the waiting instructions. What, in our darkness, do we do while we are waiting for the fireworks? You seek justice in whatever ways you can, you love kindness as best you are able and you walk with as much humility as you can muster...following God as best you can experience Her.

For whoever said that God's vision was always nothing but good news? Certainly Habakkuk, who was asking "why" questions about the invasion of Israel by the Chaldeans – very real anxiety about very real suffering...certainly Habakkuk didn't see any of this presence of God as good news. Even the angel tells Mary that he has good news for her, she is to deliver a son who will be the savior of the world...but Mary, he reminds her...this also will break your heart.

God does not advertise on billboards or in grand designs. Often times we don't even know that God has been at work until we start asking the "whys" and get to the "whats". God sparks us into new life, in the midst of our suffering, in the pain of the tragic, in the full blanket of the darkness we feel surround us. Still we stand at the watchpost to keep watch...for that's our faithful task.

Meanwhile...I want to share with you some sparks in the darkness. These stories don't cure our anguish over tragic and senseless deaths, they don't end poverty or heal our planet or right our economic injustices we have visited upon one another. They are simply sparks. The beginnings or the ends of a bonfire, depending on what we do with them. These came from those moments in which the news delivered something different...from a blogsite called Religion Dispatches and from the Associated Press:

"On the morning of Sunday, September 19, about ninety members of the Oakland, California stake (diocese) of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints met with Elder Marlin K. Jensen, the Church's historian and a prominent member of the General Authorities, the ranking hierarchy of Mormon leaders.

Stake President Dean Criddle had invited Jensen to the special meeting, advising him that many Mormon families in the area continued to feel hurt by the Church's deep involvement in the Proposition 8 campaign. He hoped that Elder Jensen would be willing to hear their stories. Elder Jensen agreed.

During the one-hour meeting, thirteen gay and straight Mormons came to the microphone. Many expressed their love for the faith, as well as the profound pain caused by LDS Church actions towards gays and lesbians. Gay Mormons recalled years of prayer and fasting, attempted heterosexual marriages promising to "cure" them, and Church-prescribed aversion therapy. Gay and straight Mormons spoke of how their families and neighborhoods had been divided by the Yes on 8 campaign in California, largely pushed for and funded by the Mormon Church. And some expressed their anger over the Church's leading role in a political campaign that gave California and the Mormon community a "license to hate" homosexuals.

There was sobbing. There were tears. Elder Jensen also shed tears as he listened and took notes to share with other General Authorities back in Salt Lake City. At the conclusion of the hour, he apologized for the pain he was witnessing. Elder Jensen said, "To the full extent of my capacity, I say that I am sorry . . . I know that many very good people have been deeply hurt, and I know that the Lord expects better of us."

Even in the heart of institutional Mormonism, many LDS people remain conflicted, sensitive, unclear, ambivalent, and tender about why the Church became so involved in the Proposition 8 campaign, what was lost, what was gained, and what purposes it will ultimately serve.

"In tenderness, there is reason for hope."

Then there is the story of Seth Reams, who lost his job as a concierge in December 2008, took an energetic approach to his job hunt, circulating his resumé to more than three hundred potential employers. But when he got no bites, Reams told KOMO Newsradio in Seattle, he felt useless, "like I wasn't a member of society anymore, like I wasn't contributing to [my] household anymore." Frustrated, he and his girlfriend, Michelle King, who worked as an assistant administrator analyst at a health insurance company, brainstormed ways for him to stay productive during his job search. Together, they came up with We've Got Time to Help, an online platform for locals who have extra time -- generally people who were laid off -- and want to contribute to the community in Portland, Oregon, where Reams and King live.

For the blog's first project, Reams helped a single pregnant woman, who also cared for her three siblings, move furniture into her home. More projects soon followed: painting a room in a battered women's shelter, teaching refugees how to drive, helping a needy family repair the roof on their home. Within 16 months of the site's launch in January 2009, We've Got Time to Help assembled more than a hundred volunteers, who've assisted hundreds of struggling locals.

"People call us with tales of hunger, home loss, job loss, personal loss, and myriad difficulties," Reams and King wrote on their blog in May 2010. "But, most still have hope. Hope that things will change. Hope that times will get better. Hope that their situation will get better. Hope that someone still cares. And if someone calls us that seems to have lost their hope, we do our best to give them a little. We tell them that we will do everything in our power to help them. We will not walk away from them. We will stand by them in their darkest hour."

Then God said...write the vision, make it plain...if it seems slow in coming, wait...it's on its way. And it will come right on time.

These sparks don't dismiss the darkness, nor do they make our sorrow any less. But we must know that even with the good news, our hearts will break. Broken open like the bread we take at this table, so that our hearts can love more fully. So we come on World Communion Sunday to celebrate this meal together...we come not expecting this to end our hunger for justice or our need for kindness...not to completely fill us with humility. This is one meal. But it is one step towards our fullness, towards our wholeness, towards the beloved community. Come to the table.