

Proper 14, Year A

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Psalm 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

Across the known world,
the kingdoms are in disarray.

Fanatical mobs
have risen up and
are on the march,
torches in hand.

Crude, rage-powered transports
plow through crowds of people,
defenseless in their path.

And across the sea,
an insecure ruler
breathes threats
of violence and destruction,
while an embattled leader
close to home
promises fire and fury
in return.

It all sounds like a TV Guide synopsis
of last week's Game of Thrones.

But this is not HBO.

There are no dragons here,
no magic,
no fantasy,
no supernatural threats
of any kind.

This real,
and it all took place
in *our* world this week,
which begs the singular question:

What in God's name are we doing?

* * *

This week I have found myself
wondering over and over
about this perverse penchant,
this dogged desire we humans have
for ridding ourselves of one another.

It started on Monday—
before all the rest of this news—
when, through a series of unexpected phone calls,
I found myself performing a wedding
at a nearby immigration detention facility.

You probably didn't know
we have one of those
in our own backyard.
We do.

Before I knew it,
there I stood in a small cell,
the bride next to me,
two guards behind us to serve as our witnesses,
and the groom, a detainee awaiting deportation,
standing on the other side of the plexiglass.
It was a no-contact wedding.
They were not allowed to touch or to exchange rings,
and the groom could barely hear me
yelling his vows to him for him to repeat
through the small speaker in the window.

I don't know the circumstances;
I didn't ask for details.
When you're a priest
you offer the sacraments
with dignity and grace
to whomever needs them.

But in that cramped little room
I got the sinking feeling
that this could very well be
the end of the road for this couple,
rather than the beginning:
that after this three-minute wedding,
she would drive away,
he would be deported,
and they may never see one another again.

Say what you will
about the current state
of immigration control,
but all I can tell you
is that in this situation,
where two people are separated
by policies and plexiglass,
the words in our marriage service
are as haunting as they are holy.
For me, the declaration
“What God has joined together
let no one put asunder,”
meant something totally new.

And yet, as I left the facility,
a couple of guards
laughed and ate their lunch
on a picnic table outside,
while, without even knowing about this,
people near and far
feel some general sense of peace
in knowing that our nation
is now rid of one more man
whom we did not want among us.

* * *

Truth is,
we’ve been finding ways
to rid ourselves of one another
forever and ever.

Look at the Old Testament lesson today.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
have finally settled the land.
All is good.
All is calm.
All is copacetic.
Or at least it should be.
But for one reason or another,
all eleven of Jacob’s sons
have decided they’ve had enough
of their little brother Joseph.

Perhaps it’s because

Joseph has a big ol' mouth
and keeps talking
about these dreams he has
wherein he sees his brothers
bowing down to him.

Or maybe it's because
daddy dearest dotes on Joseph
and gives him gifts, and coats,
and so much more
than he ever gave the rest of them.

Whatever it is,
Joseph's brothers
finally turn to one another and say,
"Here comes this dreamer.
Come now, let us kill him
and throw him into the pits. . .
then we shall see
what becomes of his dreams."

Of course, as you know,
they ultimately decide *not* to kill him,
but they do throw him in the pit
and leave him for dead.

And the craziest part of all
is that right afterward,
they sit down on the grass,
and they eat their lunch
only a few yards away
from the pit where they've just
thrown their baby brother.

Like those guards
eating their lunch on the picnic tables
just yards from where
a new marriage had been
created and destroyed
within a matter of minutes,
Joseph's brothers
get rid of him,
and laugh,
and eat,
and make their peace,
and move on with life as usual.

* * *

Maybe that's what this is all about.
Maybe that's the struggle of this week.

Maybe the ugly thing
rearing its head within our species these days
has something to do
with some desire
for a kind of peace,
and for "life as usual."

Whether it's white supremacists
marching with torches in Charlottesville,
or a madman plowing protesters with his car,
or agents quietly detaining and deporting people
right here in our own community,
or world leaders playing chicken with nuclear weaponry,
you can almost understand their logic:
if we could just get rid of the people in our way,
then we could breathe easier.
We could move on with life.
We could find some measure of peace.

But here's the thing.
Peace by subtraction,
peace by disposal,
peace by elimination,
is never the peace of God.¹

* * *

So, in weeks like this
when it feels like our world is on the edge—
when chaos appears ready to reign supreme—
where are we to turn?

Well, you know the answer to that.

We turn to the One
who is the Prince of Peace,
the true King over all the nations.

¹ Willson, Patrick. "Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28, Homiletical Perspective." Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. Web. 10 August 2017.

We turn to his Table
where all God's vagabond sinners and saints
find respite and welcome,
solace and strength,
and we eat with our eyes wide open
to the lives and needs of those around us.

We turn to the least among us,
and without shame or fear
we offer hope and help,
welcome, dignity, and grace,
just the same as our Lord has offered to us.

And we turn to Jesus,
and we pray for peace:
the kind of peace that passes all understanding,
the kind of peace that struggles to make us one,
the kind of peace that says,
"Without you, I am incomplete.
Without one another, the Body is not whole."

Our Creator has built us to love one another.

What God has joined together,
let no one put asunder.

Amen.