

Jeff's Jottings

Pain and prayer in farm country

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For weeks the people of Iowa — in fact, people across the country — had become familiar with the smiling face of Mollie Tibbetts. Mollie disappeared from her rural Iowa community last month while jogging; the search for her made headlines across our country. Tuesday we learned that Mollie will not be coming home. Her lifeless body was found in a field, the victim of evil and violence, which seems to pervade our world more deeply each day.

Anxious days have become almost the norm across our rural heartland, and not just because of the search for Mollie Tibbetts. While the economy booms in so many places, life on the farm — and in the rural towns and churches that find their livelihood from an agricultural economy — only gets harder. The average price a farmer is getting today for a bushel of corn is \$3.50 or \$3.60; it was nearly \$8 per bushel earlier this decade. Even in the 1970s, there were times corn prices topped \$3.50. The current tariff war only makes things more difficult. More and more, family farmers can't make ends meet. The handshake of a farmer, I've learned, is as firm as ever. Just not their confidence.

Sadly, these real people of the heartland are fast becoming a footnote to their own stories. Within hours of the sad news of Mollie Tibbetts, instead of grief and honoring of the dead and her family, the conversation had already pivoted to the report that the alleged perpetrator of this crime was an immigrant who was in this country illegally. The death of a young woman became a platform for political purposes and scapegoating. Similarly, our farmers increasingly are but a cameo appearance to a political debate that's more about posturing and power than their ability to make a living.

Today, in Brooklyn, Iowa, and in small towns across our heartland, there is no avoiding the pain and challenge of life. I don't begin to pretend to know, exactly, what to say, but I guess I'd start here: In the field where Millie Tibbets was recovered, a field perhaps tilled by weary and anxious hands, Christ was there. Whatever Mollie suffered, was also suffered in the very heart of God. When we suffer, God is there alongside us. And God will not let this suffering be the final word for Mollie, for her family, or for us.

Pain makes theologians of us all, I've learned. If you have spent even one day or night in physical pain, then you too know what that can do to your faith in God, not to mention your faith in your own ability to manage your life. Maybe that's why we do so much to try to avoid pain in our lives. Paying attention to the pain is one of our calls as Christians. Generosity seems to help.

As a presbytery of mostly urban and suburban people, our exposure to the challenges of rural life may be little more than the agricultural barns at the State Fair. Today, tonight, on Sunday, I hope we might remember in our prayers and our actions the family of Mollie Tibbets, and all those rural families sharing way too many anxious evenings around the dinner table. May they all know the deep presence of God in that place.